

TEMPORARY EXHIBITION

JACQUELINE NOVA

The Wonderful World of Machines

Image: CLAEAL Studio, Buenos Aires, ca. 1967-1968



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The Wonderful World of Machines

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Lab 3

From 1963 to 1974, Jacqueline Nova (Ghent, Belgium, 1935–Bogotá, 1975) cultivated a brief but intense artistic career, leaving a legacy in the field of sound that has yet to be fully uncovered. Nova is often credited with introducing electroacoustic music in Colombia; however, the extent of her contribution is not to be limited to this field, as her pioneering work extends into various areas of Colombian art history.

Nova's eleven years of creative activity were marked by three stages: the first period spanned 1964 to 1967, when she studied composition at the Conservatory of Music of Universidad Nacional de Colombia as a pupil of composer Fabio González-Zuleta. The piece *Doce móviles* (*Twelve Mobiles*) was a tipping point in Nova's artistic career, winning her the award for Chamber Orchestra Piece at the 3rd Caracas Festival of Music in 1966. This award, created as a stimulus for young Latin American composers, was the first public recognition she received from the music community. The prize gave her the opportunity to come into direct contact with other Latin American composers and to take part in the discussions of the day.

Twelve Mobiles is an acoustic piece that puts forth spatial concerns (stereophony), demonstrating her relationship to and interest in electroacoustic music. It is structured in 12 parts, called mobiles, though the order is sequential (1, 2, 3...). The piece nods to works of visual art in which movement is the inherent condition. While celebrating her win, Nova stated the following in an interview: "My esthetic concept for it is that it is music for the sake of music. I do not describe anything, let alone send a message. All I can say is that it is committed to the present era."

Jacqueline Nova lived in Buenos Aires from 1967 to 1968 as a scholar in the Latin American Center for Advanced Musical Studies (CLAEM for its Spanish acronym) of the Torcuato di Tella Institute. This experience marked the second important stage in her artistic trajectory as it gave her the advantage of an environment that encouraged creation with avant-garde styles and access to a laboratory equipped with cutting-edge technology to facilitate her research in the field, something that was impossible in the Colombia of the day. Nova's time in Argentina was significant in her life because she found a space to explore and bring to fruition many of the research opportunities she had identified during previous years in Colombia. It was thanks to her experience at the CLAEM that Nova began to work with electroacoustics almost exclusively, though in combination with traditional acoustic instruments; in other words, she became interested in mixed music as well as interdisciplinary work.

y el movimiento se detiene en el aire... (and the movement stops in midair...) is a piece for an *a cappella* ensemble and consists of four vocal groups: sopranos, contraltos, tenors and basses. Like *Twelve Mobiles*, this piece uses techniques of free serialism and spatial thought. Serialism was a symbol of modernity at the time and although Nova was no stranger to that contemporary spirit, it should be pointed out that her creativity enabled her to work with a range of sources.

The text was written by the composer and its content is a demonstration of the expressionist spirit that seduced her: "and the still, imperceptible / impenetrable beings / and the men were never still / once more and later on / incomprehensible / where / death never came / that stillness / had / passed / because the movement stops in midair." This piece was first performed for the public long after it was written, in the 2011 world premiere at the festival *En tiempo real* (In Real Time). Singer and chorus director Carolina Gamboa was invited to present it with the Vocal Experimentation Ensemble of Universidad de los Andes, a performance that also resulted in the only recording of the piece.

The third creative stage begins upon Nova's return to Colombia and lasts almost until her passing (1969-1974). There is an interval in 1972 when she travels to Buenos Aires for the second time and produces *Creación de la tierra* (Creation of the Earth), a piece that merges two of her greatest interests: human voice and electronic media. A benchmark for Latin American electroacoustic production of the 1970s, this piece was created using vocal material from songs of the U'wa indigenous people about the creation of the earth. The piece

alludes to the idea of the unintelligibility of words. In it, the electronic transformation of the voices brings different textures that uncover the original material while other asides push it further away through the use of pedals or percussive sounds – continuous or discontinuous – so often used by the composer in recurring elements of her compositions.

Another important piece from this period is *Omaggio a Catullus*, her testament and autobiography. Composed in 1972, it was revised in 1974 for its inaugural event in February 1975, four months prior to her death. In this mixed piece, Nova once again deals with vocal work, this time using a group of people reciting, in Latin, the text written by the poet Catullus. It is approached and configured in such a way that the despair and disillusionment emerge utterly exposed. In her notes on the program, Nova confirmed that the voices transmit no information but instead are treated as an acoustic phenomenon that “disrupts” the perception of the text.

With the exception of *Twelve Mobiles*, the pieces played in this exhibit share a very important element: the use of voice that strongly reaffirms the concept of it as an instrument to express a text and emphasize the word on the basis of its sound. Jacqueline Nova considered the voice to be a testimony and symbol, and it is for this reason that it was present in many of her pieces, regardless of the sound medium.

Some of the foundations of Nova's work stem from her interest in adopting technology for use in everyday creativity, disseminating contemporary music with an emphasis on Latin American artists and interacting with other fields of art and knowledge. She brought into coexistence different techniques, styles and procedures when they appeared to be irreconcilable, and integrated electronic media as orchestral instruments. Curious in nature, she made space for experimentation and the abnormal, and deemed it important to investigate, explore the unknown and submerge herself in sound. She nurtured herself with different types of music and took what she needed without obeying norms or dogmas. She listened, enjoyed and learned from artists that were unlike her, including some from divergent paths, and through her research she sought to close the gap between the artist and the public. Although she has been defined as a composer, she could also be situated as a sound or interdisciplinary artist, categories which, during her time, were just beginning to emerge.

Nova lived in a world hostile to change, to debate and to her identity as a lesbian and an autonomous woman in a field dominated by men. Her early and tragic death in 1975 not only cut short a career that was in full creative force, it also affected the development of electroacoustic music in Colombia. Following her death, the production of music using electronic media in the country fell silent for more than a decade. Though this could be explained by a lack of infrastructure for creating a space that would meet studio needs, perhaps another significant reason was that other composers of her generation (all male) were uninterested in engaging in the creative process that uses this kind of media.

Every so often, initiatives emerge that seek to keep Jacqueline Nova's memory alive. Her sounds and actions reverberate and despite the difficulties that the medium imposed on her, she maintained hope and left a great legacy: "All of these forces thought to pause before the awesome potential for production in a different world: the wonderful world of machines" (Jacqueline Nova, *The Wonderful World of Machines*, 1966).

This exhibit, *Jacqueline Nova. The Wonderful World of Machines*, journeys through the composer's three creative stages, represented by a selection of her pieces: *and the movement stops in midair...*, *Creation of the Earth*, *Omaggio a Catullus* and *Twelve Mobiles*. Testimonials and sound material are heard in between the pieces and reveal, through her voice and those of others, the bold endeavors that are being discovered with the passage of time, like trails blazed for future generations.

Ana María Romano G. / Curator

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From left to right: Hilda Dianda, Argentine composer, and Jacqueline Nova.
Buenos Aires, ca. 1967 - 1968